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SUBJECT: BULGARIA: EUR ENGAGEMENT ON WOMEN'S ISSUES

REF: STATE 124579

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Bulgarian women still struggle with domestic violence, trafficking in persons, sexism, harassment, and discrimination in the work place. To some extent, domestic priorities like combating organized crime and corruption and balancing the budget have pushed social issues, including women's issues to the back burner. Despite this challenge, we are upping our engagement with -- and empowerment of -- reformers and women activists who project a positive vision for the future. Our efforts are directed in four areas: gender sensitivity training for the Bulgarian military; identification of women participants for international visitor programs; advocacy for women's issues; and inclusion of women activists and reformers in Public Affairs events and programs when possible. END SUMMARY.

CURRENT PROGRAMS HIGHLIGHTING POST'S WORK

12. (SBU) To accomplish Post's MSP goal of strengthening Bulgaria's capacity to contribute to international security we must assist with the professionalization of Bulgaria's armed forces. This year Post received a grant from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) through the alumni grant competition to support gender sensitivity training for the Bulgarian military. The first of four seminars designed to help train the military trainers occurred in November 2009 in Sofia and was attended by the new Minister of Defense, Nickolay Mladenov.

13. (U) The Public Affairs Section (PAS) is also subsidizing the Bulgarian-language publication of, "Girls: A History of Growing up Female in America," by Penny Colman. Once published, PAS intends to use the book for projects and discussions with girls from the Pomak community (Muslims who are ethnic Bulgarians), girls from the Roma communities, and local girls' clubs.

BEST PRACTICES

14. (U) Post has a long history of identifying key women in all areas of society for the International Visitor Leadership program (IVLP). In 2008, 55 percent of Post's International Visitors were women, and 46 percent of Voluntary Visitors in 2009 were women. Forty-four percent of the International Visitors for the fiscal year 2010 are women. For the last three years Post has nominated outstanding Bulgarian women for the Secretary's annual International Women of Courage Award. This year's nominee, at great risk to herself and family, launched a one-woman campaign to rid her town of some of Bulgaria's most notorious gangsters. In the past, Post organized local award ceremonies to highlight the achievements of the "Women of Courage" nominees. Embassy officers regularly attend and support NGO-sponsored events and participate in panel discussions on women's issue.

SUCCESS STORIES

15. (SBU) In 2007 and 2008 the Embassy served as the impetus for commemorating the 16 days of international activism to eliminate violence against women. In 2007, in partnership with the Bulgarian Anti-trafficking Commission, the Embassy organized several events, including a kick-off press conference, presentation at a conference on prostitution, and a press event for the debut of the USAID-funded short film on trafficking, "Not My Life." The grand finale of the joint campaign was the Bulgarian premier of the documentary film, "Cargo: Innocence Lost," by U.S. Director Michael Cory Davis to a full house combined with an award ceremony for a Bulgarian prosecutor actively pursuing human trafficking cases. In 2009, the NGO community and the government, on their own initiative, cooperated to hold several public events commemorating the 16 days. In 2008, Post lobbied successfully to prevent the legalization of prostitution. Through extensive advocacy work Post also helped institutionalize and re-invigorate the Bulgarian Anti-trafficking Commission, which existed only on paper until we took up its cause.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCREASED COOPERATION

16. (SBU) The July 2009 election of a reform-minded government that looks to the U.S. for support and guidance has provided Post with an excellent opportunity to increase cooperation. Post's close relationship with the Bulgarian government gives us a platform to advocate for issues that relate to women, including combating trafficking in persons and domestic violence. In its short time in office, the government has already passed a new law strengthening domestic violence legislation. The political and economic imperatives of combating organized crime and corruption and balancing the budget have somewhat overshadowed women's issues on the whole. Post will continue to support programming that focuses on this important issue and helps the government identify and address key concerns.

WHERE ADDITIONAL COOPERATION COULD BE USEFUL

17. (SBU) With Bulgaria's 2007 accession into the European Union, USAID and INL will no longer provide funding in most cases to support Post's initiatives on women's issues. Post is now looking for an innovative approach to this issue, including bringing a high-level visitor from Washington to talk about human trafficking and applying for various grants. Given our excellent relationship with the Bulgarian government, we believe advocacy and engagement could go a long way in addressing some of the lingering problems in Bulgaria, such as passage of laws which prevent and discourage sexual harassment and discrimination.

SUTTON